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U.S. Ready To Stay in Cuba Base

By Matthew T. Kenny

GUANTANAMO NAVAL BASE, Cuba (UPI)—The United States is preparing for a long stay here, a visitor concludes after taking a look at this 45-square mile military enclave on Cuba's southeast coast. A talk with Rear Adm. James E. Hildreth, the base commander, confirms it.

"Castro would have to be somewhat irrational to attack," the 48-year-old Hildreth, of Ukiah, Calif., said. "He knows full well we would defend the base."

If a Cuban attack did come it more likely "would have to tie into a bigger world situation," he added.

The running flurry of incidents between Gitmo Marines and Fidel Castro's troops which prevailed here up to two years ago has faded away. A strange tranquility has taken its place.

"We watch them and they watch us," the two-star admiral explained.

The watching is done from observation posts and bunkers and trenches on both sides of the 17-mile chain link fence which separates Gitmo from Cuba. Land mines are everywhere.

There are 4,000 Marines—most of them Vietnam veterans—and Navy men here. Precise figures on Cuban troops across the fence are undisclosed. But they include at least one artillery battalion.

A Marine officer described Castro's bunker system "quite sophisticated—right out of the latest Soviet manual." Cuba has the advantage in observation since its forces hold the higher mountain ground encircling the base.

"Whoever laid out this place in 1903 (the year a base agreement in perpetuity was signed with the fledgling Cuban republic) was not thinking about the fence," Hildreth said

wryly.

Gitmo is the oldest U.S. base on foreign soil and is the only American base in a Communist country. Its importance is an aid to U.S. control over an outstanding training "ground" for warships.

"Our basic mission here is to train the Atlantic fleet," Hildreth said. "Our second basic mission is defend the base for fleet training."

Guantanamo Bay, which comprises fully one-half of the base area, is one of the best deep-water harbors on earth. Off shore the Navy has unlimited deep water of the Caribbean Sea to maneuver in usually perfect weather with uncluttered air space overhead.

An average of 12 warships, but at times as many as 19, go through prolonged "shake-down" or "refresher" training monthly. The John F. Kennedy, newest Navy carrier, is one of the ships training here now.

In the event of a Cuban attack the firepower from ships in training would back up defenses while Marines from a Caribbean "Ready Force," always at sea in the area, and others from the U.S. mainland would fly here within hours.

A continuing series of big money outlays by the Navy can be viewed as "evidence of our determination to stay here," the Admiral said.

They began four years ago when Castro cut off Cuban fresh water to the base. A \$10 million salt water conversion plant—which also supplies electric power—is now in operation making the base self-sufficient in fresh water.

But the margin of self-sufficiency is narrow and another \$2 million installation may be needed, according to plant engineers.

A string of lights—"fantastically bright," according to one Navy officer—has just been installed along the fence line for emergency use at a cost of about \$500,000.

Another \$11 million is about to be spent for air-conditioned barracks, officers' quarters and family housing, which is scarce.

Some 5000 civilians live and work here. They include 2700 military dependents; about 500 self-exiled anti-Castro base employees; nearly 400 other Cuban workers who still "commute" through one gate in the fence to their homes in Cuba; 1250 Jamaicans working on a contract basis; a handful of Chinese who've been here almost as long as the base; and various other types of U.S. civilian personnel.